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SUBJECT: POPULAR ANGER OVER LAND DISPUTES; PROTESTS IN HCMC

REF: HCMC 936 AND PREVIOUS

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Over the past few months, ConGen has observed a steady stream of small, peaceful protests over land, representing disgruntled groups from the Mekong Delta and the HCMC region. HCMC media contacts tell us of popular dissatisfaction over land expropriation policy and associated official corruption in the South. The protests in HCMC appear to reflect the frustration of Vietnam's urban and rural poor, who believe they have no transparent legal or political outlet to defend their interests. We have been able to document at least two land disputes involving ethnic minority groups in Binh Phuoc province. As reported reftel, political activists have sought to highlight the protests in their anti-Communist Party websites and, in some cases, have become advocates for citizens with land disputes. Thus far, police have not blocked the protests, although they have prevented anyone from approaching. In HCMC alone, some 55,000 households need to be relocated to move ahead with some of the city's ambitious urban and infrastructure development plans. End Summary.

Uptick in Public Protests on Land Disputes

¶2. (SBU) Over the past few months, ConGen has observed an increasing number of small, peaceful protests over land disputes. The protest groups range from 20 to 50 persons, usually all older women. They appear to represent rural and urban poor from HCMC, its environs, and provinces in the Mekong Delta. The protestors take well-defined routes, from the Presidential palace to the HCMC People's Committee or to the Southern Offices of the GVN. (The latter route takes protestors past the Consulate.) Despite a GVN ban on unauthorized gathering by any group of more than five persons in public places, police usually allow the protestors to sit silently across from Government offices. Police prevent anyone from approaching the protestors or taking pictures.

¶3. (SBU) For example, on September 1, approximately 20 women from the Mekong Delta province of Ben Tre marched in HCMC carrying signs accusing the People's Committee Chairman and Vice-Chairmen of illegally expropriating land and of corruption in land deals. In August, another group from HCMC protested government development plans in Chinatown (District Five). In July protestors from Ben Tre, Binh Duong and Long An provinces condemned government policies on land expropriation. A number of protestors carried signs decrying expropriation from the "widows of war heroes." The People's Committee Chairman of Ben Tre was attending our Fourth of July reception while a group of protestors from his province was filing by outside. At the reception, the Chairman did not raise the protest per se, but noted that he had read our Vietnamese translation of "The Lexus and the Olive Tree" on the challenges of globalization three

times.

The Price of Progress?

14. (SBU) According to newspaper reports, in HCMC alone, from 2000 to 2004, the city approved 412 development projects, requiring the expropriation of 6,000 hectares (15,000 acres) and affecting at least 53,000 households. In 2004 and 2005, the city approved another 365 projects, requiring another 1,000 hectares (2,500 acres) of land. HCMC press reports that in HCMC's District 9 5,500 households are to be compensated and relocated for redevelopment, but only 742 households have been resettled thus far. HCMC officials have asserted to us in private that providing full compensation for all affected households in HCMC would make many projects commercially unfeasible.

15. (SBU) Details of land disputes in the provinces outside HCMC are sketchy, but contacts in the media tell us that they are commonplace. Many of these cases involve local Communist Party and government malfeasance in the process of rezoning or reapportioning of farm land. In April 2005, district-level officials in rural Binh Phuoc province reportedly evicted 50 ethnic Stieng farmers from 220 hectares (550 acres) of land they had been cultivating since 1998. The district reportedly allocated the land to a state-owned, rubber plantation, but allegedly some of the land was transferred into other, private interests. At least some of the ethnic Stieng were affiliated with the Inter-Evangelistic Movement Protestant house church. Eight protestors were detained during the eviction. In a second case in 2006, local-level officials ordered the transfer of 50 hectares (125 acres) of land from a dozen ethnic M'Nong families to a state-owned rubber producer. In June, district-level officials temporarily halted the transfer following an appeal from the group that at least some of the land was improperly distributed to local government and Communist Party cadre. A HCMC police contact told us recently that police in rural areas routinely are allocated "government" land as part of their

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compensation package to make up for low wages.

16. (SBU) Comment: Although there have been land protests in HCMC in the past, they have tended to be few in number and local in character. The convergence of groups from provinces surrounding HCMC is a new phenomenon; it may reflect the increasing pace of development throughout southern Vietnam. Protestors may hold out some hope that the Central Government might intervene where provincial- and lower-level government does not. The GVN recently opened a southern branch of its national complaints office in HCMC to deal with the growing workload in the southern half of the country. They also may head to HCMC because they believe that police are less inclined to take action against them there than in their local communes.

17. (SBU) Comment Continued: Nonetheless, public protest remains a brave and desperate act for Vietnamese -- even in HCMC. It reflects the frustration of Vietnam's urban and rural poor, who believe they have no effective legal or political outlet to challenge official decisions or to obtain fair compensation. Their anger is compounded by corruption within the system; all too often the Party and Government officials ruling on a land case are the ones that are benefiting -- directly or indirectly -- from the distribution, onward sale or rezoning of that land. In the process, even "cleaner" development projects get tarnished. How HCMC officials deal with this sensitive subject will help determine the pace of planned large-scale clearance and re-development of neighborhoods in HCMC, including the development of a new satellite city and convention center. Political dissident groups have been publicizing land protests on anti-GVN websites. One group has been working with disgruntled citizens to organize and file complaints with the GVN (reftel).

18. (SBU) Comment continued: These same land disputes often

become even thornier when they involve ethnic minority groups, who often do not have full legal title to the land they occupy. In Binh Phuoc and in the Central Highlands, these disputes quickly become conflated with charges of ethnic or religious discrimination. End Comment.
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